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## HOW SHOULD THE BIBLE BE STUDIED IN THE SUNDAY SCHOOL.

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THIS question has derived an increased importance and a fresh pungency from the change which has taken place in our view of the Bible as a result of the application of scientific methods to biblical study during the past quarter of a century. Until recently the question would have been answered simply and directly in accordance with the prevailing idea of the plenary inspiration and verbal inerrancy of the Sacred Scriptures. To a great extent "the higher criticism" has compelled a new and in many respects different answer. It is no wonder that many Sunday School teachers are perplexed. Some of them have read enough of the "findings" and arguments of critical scholars to know that it is no longer possible to teach the Bible in the old way; yet most of these are not sufficiently familiar with critical results and methods to use them with confidence and skill. Some seek to evade all questions of authorship, of chronology, of discrepancy in statements of fact and religious teaching, and of historic development, and confine themselves solely to the illustrative and practical use of the Bible, particularly of the Old Testament, in enforcing familiar religious and moral ideas. Their attempt, however, does not save them from embarrassment, for they are continually disturbed by difficulties that rise both in their own minds and in the minds of some of their pupils. Others take refuge in a frank and determined conservatism and by a *tour de force* endeavor to compel resistant and incredulous pupils to accept the old view of the Bible as *ipsissimis verbis*, the dictation of the Holy Spirit.

The Sunday school teachers, especially the Bible class teachers of these days deserve the sympathy and the help of careful biblical scholars. Their position is one of extreme difficulty. For many of them, like the sad poet, are

Between two worlds,—  
One dead, one waiting to be born.

Fortunately, however, with all the difficulty of their situation they can find in the Bible abundant material of moral and spiritual instruction which is in no way invalidated or even rendered doubtful by the results of critical investigation.

Before I proceed to a somewhat detailed answer to the question which forms the caption of this article, I desire to say some things by way of prelude.

In the first place we must recognize the fact that a change of view has so far been accomplished as to estop intelligent denial. The movement of modern thought on the Bible cannot with safety or profit be ignored. That movement is not the result of caprice, or of an "unsanctified heart" and consequent hostility to evangelical religion. The higher criticism is carried on by men who are not only able and honest, but also, many of them, profoundly religious. "Truth is the strong thing," said Browning, and it is love of truth and unwearying devotion to the search for truth to which, more than to any thing else, the present changed conception of the Scriptures is due. For good or ill, I firmly believe for good, the old idea of the Bible is passing never to return. We shall go back to it no more than we shall go back to the Ptolemaic Astronomy. It would be a greater misfortune to go back to it than it would be to go back to the Ptolemaic Astronomy.

In the second place we must recognize the importance of right methods. The Bible equally with all other subjects of investigation, should be studied rationally. Because of its supreme importance, the Bible will yield to rational study the richest results.

It follows from this truth, that the Sunday school teacher today must qualify himself as never before for his work. The time has passed when "anybody can teach in the Sunday school." Already we have this anomalous condition in our churches, that often the preacher has to undo in the pulpit what has been mistakenly done in the Sunday school room. It must be said also, that the Sunday school, in many quarters, is losing its power over the more mature boys and girls, as well as over adults, because the teaching in both substance and method, is behind the times. It is impossible long to keep the Sunday school alive and in the best sense prosperous if archaic notions of the Bible are perpetuated in the teaching; and the attempt to perpetuate those notions is fraught with mischief, for they are preventive of a true idea of Christianity. A superficial knowledge of the main results of scientific biblical study is imparted to a considerable number of people in many congregations by the periodical press. This compels the minister to give some heed to these results in his sermons, and the disparity between the teaching in the Sunday school and the teaching in the pulpit, where, as is too often the case, such disparity exists, is demoralizing. There is need, in both Sunday school and pulpit, of entire frankness in the treatment of questions that arise about the Bible. More harm is done by evasion than by answers that at first unsettle traditional beliefs; and confessed ignorance on the part of the teacher is far less mischievous than wilful refusal to give any attention to conclusions which careful scholars have reached and announced.

Intrinsically the Bible is the most interesting volume in the world; it is often made uninteresting and even repulsive by a treatment of it that is lacking in intelligence and in fearless respect for truth.

But if there is need of frankness there is need also of wisdom. The

spirit of reverence is absolutely necessary to any profitable handling of the Bible. More than that, there should be a sensitive regard for the weakness of those who are ignorant and unskilled in intellectual discrimination. The teacher who busies himself mainly with what he is pleased to call "the defects of the Bible" will not be likely to perceive its unequaled merits. The mere iconoclast is out of place in the chair of the religious teacher.

As to method in the study of the Bible I offer but one or two remarks.

The various books of the Bible should be studied in their proper character as *literature*. Poetry must not be hardened into prose nor heroic legend confounded with bald statement of fact. The various books should be considered also in connection with the circumstances and conditions, social, political and religious, out of which they rose. And, still more, they should be studied, not piecemeal, but in their integrity. The Bible is not an arsenal of proof-texts; when it is made such it is abused and a large part of its charm and of its worth is taken away.

The Bible should be studied in the light of the fundamental truth that it is the product and the record of an historic development through which has come a divine revelation. This fundamental truth is somewhat obscured by the common arrangement of books, particularly in the Old Testament. The ordinary Sunday school teacher thinks of the common order as strictly chronological, from Genesis to Revelation, while for example, it is now a commonplace of biblical knowledge that a large part of the Pentateuch is later than the prophets, Amos, Hosea, the first Isaiah, etc., and most of the Psalms are post-exilic. The historic development of the Scriptures does not appear to the ordinary reader of the English version, but it unquestionably appears to him who studies these Scriptures carefully in the light of recent investigation. The discovery of this historic development gives a new interest and meaning to the Bible and lets one deeply into the method of divine revelation. When, by careful study, one has grasped the real connection between the prophecies and Hebrew history he has opened a treasury of truths that enrich both his mind and his heart.

The Bible should be studied also with the resolute purpose to discriminate between the essential and the incidental. There is no greater obstacle to an intelligent understanding and interpretation of the Bible than the indiscriminate confounding of values which was once so common as to be almost universal. The details of Hebrew history are both interesting and valuable, but they are not to be compared in interest and value with the progressive disclosure to the Hebrew mind of the nature and will of God, the meaning of righteousness and the divine purpose of human redemption which attains culminating expression in the person and life of Jesus Christ. That a particular psalm was not written by David but by some unknown poet of the Babylonian captivity is interesting to the scholar, but the deep religious meaning of the psalm is of value to all who would nourish the spiritual life. It

is of interest to know what Hebrews of the seventh or fifth century before Christ thought of sacrifice and its effect on man's relation to God, but it is far more valuable to know that "the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit," whether in the fifth century before or in the nineteenth century after Christ.

Finally, the Bible should be studied with a right motive. The desire for knowledge is a commendable motive, and he who studies the Bible simply in order to know its history, structure and contents is profitably engaged. But we should have a deeper motive. In a preëminent sense the Bible is a source of truth that concerns life, and character and destiny. It should be studied, then, with constant view to the practical ends of furnishing a rational basis of religious faith and a trustworthy guide of daily conduct. Truth attaining its legitimate end in right character — this is the proper outcome of biblical study in the Sunday school. Experience has amply proved that the Bible, despite defective ideas of its structure and date and sources, may yield a divine aid in the culture of the heart and the conduct of life. It will do this not less, but more, abundantly the better it is known. Fuller knowledge may strip away many superstitions and mistaken notions of God's method in dealing with man, but it will give more than it takes away and what it gives will abide, a permanent treasure.